

Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy Update (Planning, Policy & Economic Development, John Devonshire)

Synopsis of report:

The purpose of this report is to inform Members that work has commenced on the development of a Runnymede Green & Blue Infrastructure (GBI) Strategy. This report sets out what the purpose of a GBI Strategy is and the key steps in its preparation.

Recommendation(s) that:

the preparation of a draft Runnymede Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy and the timetable for preparation, be noted

1. Context of report

- 1.1 The Environment Act 2021 sets out mandatory requirements for development to meet a minimum 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) which will come into effect in November 2023. The Act also requires the Secretary of State to set long term targets for air and water quality and requires authorities to prepare Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS). Surrey County Council will be the authority preparing the LNRS which will cover Runnymede Borough.
- 1.2 To support the Environment Act and the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, the Government has recently published its Environmental Improvement Plan. This includes making Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) mandatory in development from 2024 and introducing a target to ensure everyone lives within a 15 minute walk of green or blue spaces. To support the Environmental Improvement Plan, Natural England has recently published a green infrastructure framework which aims to help local authorities create and/or improve GBI in their area.
- 1.3 The Runnymede Corporate Business Plan vision includes reference to enhancing our environment, and relevant themes in the supporting Corporate strategies include:

Climate Change Strategy - Aims to play a key role in creating a greener environment and effective response to climate change. Specifically in relation to GBI this includes:

- To drive biodiversity net gain/add to biodiversity in the Borough;
- Playing a leading role in delivering the River Thames Scheme by 2030;

Health & Wellbeing Strategy – Focus and objectives of the strategy include:

- Working to address wider determinants of health locally;
- Objective that all residents will be able to engage and participate in their community, access services, facilities, amenities, leisure, and recreational opportunities locally.

- 1.4 The Runnymede 2030 Local Plan contains policies which seek to restore, maintain and enhance GBI features and deliver a high quality multi-functional GBI network, primarily through Policies EE11 (Green Infrastructure) and EE12 (Blue Infrastructure). Other features that GBI delivers such as nature conservation, biodiversity net gain, sport, recreation and health/well-being benefits are also supported by Local Plan policies SD7 (Sustainable Design), SL1 (Health & Wellbeing), SL25 (Existing Open Space), Policy SL26 (New Open Space), Policy SL28 (Playing Pitches), Policy EE1 (Townscape & Landscape Quality) and Policy EE9 (Biodiversity, Geodiversity & Nature Conservation).
- 1.5 In order to support, implement and guide aspects of Runnymede 2030 Local Plan policies which relate to GBI, the Council adopted guidance on how developers, including householders, should deliver GBI and biodiversity net gain in its Green & Blue Infrastructure Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which is a material consideration in decision making. The SPD however, does not set out an overarching strategy for GBI delivery, creation or enhancement or identify projects. This will be the role of the GBI Strategy.

2. Report and options considered

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to inform Members that work has commenced on the development of a Runnymede Green & Blue Infrastructure (GBI) Strategy. This work is being led by the Council's Planning Policy Team but will include close working with the Council's Community Services and Environmental Services departments in particular given that between them, these two departments are responsible for managing and maintaining the Council's network of open spaces. Input from the Assets and Regeneration, and Housing Services departments is also likely to be required.
- 2.2 Whilst there is no mandatory requirement for local authorities to prepare GBI Strategies, it is considered that such a strategy will aid implementation of the Environment Act 2021, especially in relation to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan, the Council's Corporate Climate Change & Health & Well-being Strategies and the Runnymede 2030 Local Plan in terms of BNG and GBI.
- 2.3 GBI plays an important role in helping to halt biodiversity loss, aiding nature recovery, building resilience to and mitigating against climate change, promoting health & wellbeing, creating resilient and safe communities, as well as reinforcing the local character of different areas.
- 2.4 GBI therefore has a number of important and varied roles for general recreation, sports, play, relaxation, growing local food, travel and wildlife refuges with features such as designated sites for nature, the Borough's parks and open spaces, allotments, rivers, lakes and canals to name but a few.
- 2.5 The purpose of the GBI Strategy is to set the framework for the Council's approach to GBI; identifying the assets and features we have, whether there are any deficits or weaknesses and where/how these could be strengthened with opportunities/projects for improving/enhancing GBI and partners required to aid delivery. This will give an overarching but comprehensive strategy on where resources such as developer contributions, including through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and other funding should be focussed and prioritised.
- 2.6 The GBI Strategy will set out background information on why GBI is important and its purpose, include an audit of GBI in Runnymede and set out a vision and objectives of what it is trying to achieve. It is envisaged that the remainder of the strategy, including any recommendations, will be centred around a number of themes (to be agreed upon). Within each theme will be a consideration of GBI in the Borough, identification of deficits/weaknesses/opportunities and where GBI and GBI connectivity could be strengthened.

2.7 To date, initial stages of preparation have involved an audit of GBI assets and features in the Borough and this work is currently on-going. Once this is completed, next steps will include initial meetings with internal partners including Councillors to gather ideas and information followed by early stakeholder involvement to garner views from outside bodies, organisations, the public and delivery partners.

Following stakeholder involvement, it is anticipated that work will begin on drafting the strategy for public consultation later in 2023, followed by adoption in 2024. An indicative timetable for the preparation of the GBI strategy, including key stages, is set out as follows:

- Complete audit of GBI – Spring 2023;
- Undertake internal member and officer meetings to gather ideas on vision, objectives, approach and themes – Spring 2023;
- Undertake workshops with external stakeholders on approach/vision/objectives and to gather ideas on projects – Summer 2023;
- Finalise draft GBI Strategy - Summer/Autumn 2023;
- Undertake public consultation on draft strategy and consider feedback – Autumn/Winter 2023;
- Adopt Final Strategy – Spring 2024

3. Policy framework implications

3.1 Once adopted, the Strategy will aid delivery of Environment Act 2021 targets on BNG, the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan target for everyone to live within a 15 minute walk of a green or blue space as well as Corporate Business Plan objectives related to Climate Change and Health & Well-being.

3.2 The GBI Strategy will also support the Runnymede 2030 Local Plan policies set out in paragraph 1.4 of this report as well as inform infrastructure planning and funding decisions.

4. Financial and resource implications

4.1 Production of the GBI Strategy is being undertaken in-house, led by the Planning Policy Team. There are no additional resource implications beyond that provided for within the agreed Planning Policy budget.

4.2 Preparation of the Strategy will include staff from Planning Policy but will also require input from the departments listed at paragraph 2.1 during the project to ensure that the ideas, vision, objectives, themes and projects are supported across the organisation. This will not necessarily extend beyond attendance at internal meetings.

5. Legal implications

5.1 As preparation of the Strategy is at an early stage no specific implications have been identified at the time of writing this report. However, there could be legal implications if the Council wishes to encourage 3rd party landowners to enter into agreements for GBI delivery and management on land outside of the Council's control.

6. Equality implications

6.1 The Council has a Public Sector Duty under the Equalities Act 2010 (as amended) to have due regard to the need to:

- a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation;
- b) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a Protected Characteristic and persons who do not share it;

- c) Foster good relations between those who share a relevant characteristic and persons who do not share those characteristics;

in relation to the 9 'Protected Characteristics' stated within the Act.

- 6.2 The draft GBI Strategy once prepared will be screened to establish whether there may be an impact, either positive or negative on any of the nine protected characteristics (namely, age, disability, race/ethnicity, pregnancy and maternity, religion, sexual orientation, sex, gender reassignment and marriage/civil partnership). This will be reported in later Committee reports.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity Implications

- 7.1 The GBI Strategy will aid delivery of the Environment Act 2021, especially in relation to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). It will also aid delivery of the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan in relation to water quality and targets for access to green and/or blue space. The Strategy will also help to deliver Corporate Business Plan strategies and Local Plan policies for climate change, biodiversity, sustainable design and green/blue infrastructure.

- 7.2 Whilst not proposed to be part of the Development Plan which guides determination of planning applications in the Borough, a GBI Strategy could be considered a plan or project. Should a plan or project have significant effects on the environment (whether positive or negative) a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) would be required. If the Strategy has the potential to effect sites forming part of the National Site Network (formerly Natura 2000 sites such as Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)) a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) would be required. A screening assessment will be undertaken during preparation of the Strategy to determine if SEA and/or HRA is required.

8. Other Implications

- 8.1 The GBI Strategy is likely to have positive beneficial effects on implementing the Corporate Climate Change and Health & Well-being Strategies.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 Community Services Committee is asked to note the preparation of a draft Runnymede Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy and the timetable for its preparation.

(To resolve)

Background papers

None.